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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes the problem of over-representation of minority students in special education and offers suggestions to reduce this disproportionate representation. It notes concerns of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) that minority students are being misclassified and receiving inappropriate services and/or discriminatory placement in special education. Suggestions for reducing over-representation focus on creating a successful school environment for all students and distinguishing disabilities from cultural differences. Specific suggestions are offered for promoting family involvement, making the general education classroom conducive to success for all children, increasing the accuracy of referral and evaluation, providing appropriate special education services, and monitoring the provision of services. Also noted are federal activities of OSEP and OCR to reduce over-representation. (DB)

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Reducing the Disproportionate Representation Of Minority Students in Special Education

Jane Burnette

Students from some racial and ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to be disproportionately placed in special education programs and classes. For example, in 1992, Black students accounted for 16 percent of the total U.S. student population, but represented 32% of students in programs for mild mental retardation (MMR), 29% in programs for moderate mental retardation, and 24% in programs for serious emotional disturbance (SED) (Robertson, Kushner, Starks, & Drescher, 1994). To a lesser extent, some groups of students are underrepresented in special education and overrepresented in programs for gifted and talented students. Such disproportionate representation of minority groups is an ongoing national problem.This digest concerns the overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

The U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the U.S. Office for Civil Rights (OCR) have three concerns about disproportionate representation:

- Students may be unserved or receive services that do not meet their needs.
- Students may be misclassified or inappropriately labeled.
- Placement in special education classes may be a form of discrimination.

Reducing disproportionate representation is a high priority for both offices and for many groups and associations that represent ethnic minorities and/or special education.

What Can Be Done To Reduce Overrepresentation?

Overrepresentation is a complex problem, and reducing it calls for pervasive strategies. Reducing overrepresentation is a matter of creating a successful school environment for all students and accurately distinguishing disabilities from cultural differences. An ecological approach that recognizes the influence of the learning environment on the process of teaching and learning is critical. It is important to appreciate that the risk of low academic performance and challenging behaviors does not reside solely within the child or family--instructional, classroom and school variables can and do contribute to academic problems. Suggestions to reduce disproportionate representation are presented below and in the following sections.

- Develop a district-wide vision for the education of all students.
- Review traditional school practices to identify and address factors that may contribute to student difficulties.
- Redefine staff roles to support a shared responsibility for all students.
- Form policy-making bodies that include community members, and promote partnerships with service agencies and cultural organizations.
- Help families get social, medical, mental health and other support services. Develop supports such as early childhood and at-risk programs, and offer an array of services to the community.
- Recruit and retain educators who have had course work and experience with diverse student populations and who are from diverse backgrounds.

Promote Family Involvement

Although involving parents and families is key to raising academic achievement for students from minority backgrounds, schools have often been unsuccessful in achieving high levels of participation from low-income and bilingual parents. These parents may have had negative experiences in school and may be reluctant to meet with educators, or they may have little formal education and feel unqualified to contribute. If they are asked to make contributions for which they don't feel qualified, their negative feelings may be exacerbated. Schools that have raised the achievement of minority students tend to be those in which parents and family members participate in a variety of roles, including shared governance. Suggestions for promoting involvement include:

- Identify and address obstacles to parent participation. Offer school staff comp-time for facilitating parent availability for meetings.
- Provide options for involvement that are matched to families' motivations, interests and abilities and make sure that families are aware of the many ways they can support the education of their children.
- Ensure that the school is welcoming, staff are accessible, and staff understand and respect diverse family networks and child rearing traditions.
- Include family members beyond the nuclear family who are involved in daily child rearing.
- Make parents and families aware of the roles and responsibilities expected of them in the school--these may differ from their roles and responsibilities in their own cultures.
- Support parent-to-parent advocacy such as Title I liaison activities.
- Communicate in ways that convey respect and appreciation for cultural differences
- Translate documents for families who do not communicate easily in English.

Make the General Education Classroom Conducive to Success for All Children

Educators need to be aware of the cultural influences on behavior. They may need training to develop their knowledge of cultural beliefs, values, behaviors and expectations, as well as their own attitudes, values and perspectives toward diversity. They should know how to use cross-cultural communication skills with students, families and community members and be able to develop, evaluate, and use multicultural curricula and interventions.

For most children referred for evaluation, academic failure is related to problems in learning to read. It is crucial to emphasize reading and to have a strong array of alternate instructional strategies to address reading difficulties. Curricula should incorporate students' cultural backgrounds, be relevant to their lives, and build on their experiences.

When a student's English proficiency is limited, it may be difficult for a teacher to tell if academic problems are due to a disability or a language difference. In such cases, the teacher must informally assess the student's English language proficiency. Enhancing traditional tests with other assessments such as classroom

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observations and performance measures can provide the information needed to develop appropriate lessons or identify alternative teaching strategies. Other strategies to support minority children include

- Teach students how to study and how to learn, as well as social skills and cross-cultural understanding.
- Create active learning experiences that allow children to learn in their own styles and according to their own aptitudes.
- Use pre-referral strategies in general education. Document the strategies used and their results.
- Provide training in alternative instruction and materials and in distinguishing the characteristics of a disability from characteristics that reflect cultural differences.
- Use joint problem-solving to extend each teacher's repertoire of instructional strategies and provide multiple perspectives on a student's difficulties. Problem-solving should not be the sole responsibility of special education personnel.

Increase the Accuracy of Referral and Evaluation

A clear referral system, including specific criteria, implementation procedures, and evaluation procedures, is essential to appropriate referrals. The process should rule out other factors that might contribute to behavioral and academic difficulties. It should substantiate that the student's academic or behavioral problem is consistent and pervasive and reflects a disability rather than a cultural difference, lack of English language proficiency, or economic disadvantage. Documentation of pre-referral efforts and their results should accompany the referral to aid in interpreting assessment results and planning effective special education interventions.

Multiple assessment measures and a broad base of student data are essential to a valid determination of eligibility and placement. Over-reliance on IQ scores is inconsistent with IDEA and Section 504 and contrary to sound educational practices. When used in conjunction with more formal assessments, alternative assessments have the potential to provide information that helps to distinguish differences from disabilities. Overall, information should be available about the student's total environment (school, home, community, peer groups) and his or her ability to learn in each of these sub-environments.

The following recommendations also help to increase the accuracy of referral and evaluation:

- Ensure that the staff knows requirements and criteria for referral and is kept abreast of current research affecting the process.
- Check that the student's general education program uses instructional strategies appropriate for the individual, has been adjusted to address the student's area of difficulty, includes ongoing communication with the student's family, and reflects a culturally responsive learning environment.
- Involve families in the decision to refer to special education in ways that are sensitive to the family's cultural background.
- Use only tests and procedures that are technically acceptable and culturally and linguistically appropriate. Testing personnel should have had training in conducting these particular assessments and interpreting the results in a culturally responsive manner.
- Personnel who understand how racial, ethnic and other factors influence student performance should be included in the eligibility decision.
- When eligibility is first established, a set of firm standards for the student's progress and readiness to exit special education should be recorded.

Provide Appropriate Special Education Services

Special education is not a place, but an array of services to support the student's progress. The services provided to a student should be an outgrowth of the assessment process, which reflects the student's unique background. All of this should be reflected in the student's individualized educational program.

By law, services must be provided in the least restrictive environment. Students with disabilities may not be removed from the general education classroom and placed in separate special education settings unless it has been explicitly determined that the general education setting is not appropriate to the student's educational needs, even with supplemental aids and services. A unified system that includes general and special education, with more services provided in the general education classroom, can provide flexible alternatives.

Monitor the Provision of Services

States and districts should continuously monitor referral and enrollment data by race, ethnicity, language, disability, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. The 1997 amendments to IDEA require states to collect and report data on race and ethnicity along with data on disabilities. As well as giving the state or district needed data on their student demographics, this provides the data to assess efforts to reduce disproportionate representation.

Federal Activities to Reduce Overrepresentation

OSEP and OCR continue to address disproportionate representation as a priority. OSEP funds important research and technical assistance activities that provide insight into the issues and strategies to resolve these concerns. This research has played a critical role in advancing the knowledge and understanding about how to address the multiple, complex issues concerning minorities and special education. OCR has designated minority students in special education as a priority enforcement issue. Both OSEP and OCR are developing and disseminating resource materials to help prevent and correct disproportionate representation.

This digest is based, in large part, on a report prepared by Project FORUM at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (Markowitz, Garcia & Eichelberger, 1997). Project FORUM, funded by OSEP, worked closely with staff from OCR during the development of the report.

Resources

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